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TAGS: [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [VT](#)

SUBJECT: ITALIAN EC MINISTER BUTTIGLIONE ADDRESSES
SECULARISM, EU ISSUES, WITH VATICAN PRESS CORPS

Ref: A) 04 Rome 4268; B) Vatican 102; C) 04 Vatican 4441

Summary

1. (U) Italian Minister of European Community Policies Rocco Buttiglione described a rising tide of secularism in Europe that he claimed was ironically having a positive effect on ecumenical and inter-religious relations in a January 11 appearance before an audience of the Vatican press corps and others connected to the Holy See. He said he had received many messages of support from Muslims, Jews, and Orthodox Christians in connection with the rejection of his nomination for a post on the European Commission because of comments describing homosexuality as a sin. Buttiglione called for people of faith to become active in political life to defend orthodox positions on "life and family issues" such as abortion, cloning and marriage; he called for his allies to influence the EU, not turn away from it. These issues, he suggested, should fall within the purview of individual EU member states rather than be controlled by Union-wide policies.

2. (SBU) Buttiglione expressed confidence that the influence of the Catholic Church in particular and religion in general would eventually regain a better hold on the public square in Europe. Though Buttiglione and the media are concentrating nearly exclusively on "life and family" issues during these heated culture wars, the Vatican has maintained a broader perspective on key challenges facing Catholics and others in public life, an approach seen most recently in the Pope's address to the Vatican Diplomatic Corps. End Summary.

Controversy Strengthens Inter-religious Ties

3. (U) Italian Minister of European Community Policies Rocco Buttiglione described a rising tide of secularism that he claimed was having a positive effect on ecumenical and inter-religious relations in a January 11 appearance before an audience of the Vatican press corps and others connected to the Holy See. The forum was organized by Inside the Vatican magazine and the Acton Institute, a U.S.-based NGO with a branch in Italy. Buttiglione, whose nomination for a post on the European Commission was rejected after he said he regarded homosexual behavior as a sin (Ref A), recounted the many expressions of solidarity he had received during and after the EC controversy. He said many Jews, Muslims and Orthodox Christians had contacted him and complained that he had been treated unfairly by the EU and in the media. [These supporters] "affirmed the right of everyone to have an opinion of right and wrong, and good and evil," Buttiglione said. He expressed the hope that what he regarded as encroaching secularism would aid relations between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, and opined that these currents were helping the two groups focus on shared beliefs rather than those that divide them.

Activism Needed

4. (U) When asked about the Catholic Church's influence on political life, Buttiglione said that it was crucial for people of faith to get involved politically on "family and life" issues such as cloning, abortion and marriage. These issues, he suggested, should fall within the purview of individual EU member states rather than be controlled by Union-wide policies. He expressed confidence that the influence of the Catholic Church in particular and religion in general would eventually regain a better hold on the public square in Europe. The impact of these forces is cyclical, he maintained.

EU Nowhere else to go

15. (U) Buttiglione dismissed the idea that people of faith disillusioned with the EU should try to influence their countries to withdraw from it. "If anyone has a right to be bitter [about the EU] it's me," he said. "But where else is a country like Poland going to go?" This is the "only Europe we have," he said. The task is to recognize that this is "our moment in history;" people of faith must band together "to influence the EU, not escape from it." On the question of Turkey's membership in the EU, Buttiglione was hesitant, but reserved final judgment,

Atypical Conservatism?

17. (SBU) Though his answers were in line with the thinking of the generally socially conservative audience on most issues, Buttiglione's opinions were sometimes at odds with the rigid depiction of him often seen in the media. On abortion, he said that it was necessary to "rethink the issue" and that the solution was not simply the criminalization of the procedure. "We need to recreate the bond between the mother and child," he insisted. On social policy regarding working mothers, Buttiglione suggested that new policies were needed to assist mothers to be able to earn sufficient wages that would allow them a more comfortable place in the workforce even as they contended with the responsibilities of motherhood.

Comment: Support for Buttiglione...

18. (SBU) The day of Buttiglione's appearance, a front page (New York Times) story in the International Herald Tribune (IHT) on the Pope's address to the Vatican Diplomatic Corps (Ref B) noted that "the Vatican [had] rallied behind Buttiglione" when he ran into trouble in his European Commission bid. Though the reality of the "Vatican" reaction is more complex, the Buttiglione controversy has undoubtedly influenced the Holy See's thinking, reinforcing its perception that Christianity is under attack in Europe (Ref C). The presence of a small but sympathetic and energized audience at Buttiglione's recent appearance suggests that the political sensibilities he represents are not going to fade quickly, in Vatican circles and beyond.

...but Papal Attention to Other Issues Gets Short Shrift

19. (SBU) Interestingly, Buttiglione focused almost exclusively on the "family and life issues" of cloning, abortion, and marriage when describing key issues facing the EU -- and Catholics in the public square. Indeed, the IHT story on the major Papal address delivered one day earlier likewise focused nearly entirely on the Pontiff's opposition to same-sex marriage and other "family values." In reality, the Pope's speech spent only one paragraph out of some 23 on the "sanctity of marriage," placing greater emphasis on world hunger, challenges to world peace, and violations of religious freedom around the world. It remains to be seen if these additional Papal priorities will get further traction during the current culture wars.
End Comment.

110. (U) Embassy Rome POL and PA have cleared this cable.

Nicholson

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